

Rutland Herald

Article published May 15, 2006

Paramount evening a tribute to Jeffords

Jim Jeffords got a good look at his legacy Friday night.

The Paramount Theatre threw a tribute to the retiring senator who was its greatest patron Friday night. Hundreds turned out to honor Jeffords and watch a performance by political comedy troupe The Capitol Steps. The event also served as a fundraiser to pay for air conditioning at the theater.

Jeffords was given two standing ovations, one when he was announced at the beginning of the performance and the other during the intermission, when a portrait of him that will grace the walls of the theater was unveiled.

The audience also applauded wildly when one of the performers referred to Jeffords' departure from the Republican Party. The reference was made to introduce "You Don't Mess Around With Jim," a song the troupe wrote about the event.

Beforehand, while a barbershop group performed in the lobby, a number of Jeffords' friends, peers and colleagues gathered for a reception upstairs.

"I've known Jim Jeffords for some 30 years," Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., said. "I've worked with him in Congress now for 16 years. There is no question that his service to Vermont will be remembered as outstanding — his record on education, the environment and women's rights. It's been a real honor to serve with him."

Senate President Pro Tem Peter Welch called Jeffords a giant in politics, in the state and in the country.

"He's the conscience of politics," Welch said. "Many of us in politics, Democrats and Republicans, in our dreams hope we'll have some of his quality and character."

The Capitol Steps did songs and sketches on current events, from a tune about recent White House attrition titled "As the Resignations Go Rolling Along," to a group of Democrats singing about their desire for a viable candidate to "Wouldn't it be Lovely" from "My Fair Lady."

The act touched on high gas prices with a song called "What Kind of Fuel am I?" and steroids in baseball with "Barry with the Syringe on Top," and immigration with a duet between Mexican President Vicente Fox and a member of the Minutemen.

"I just went for my state-sponsored physical," said a man portraying a member of the Iraqi government. "The doctor said I have six months to live. I said 'Woo-hoo! Six months — that's more than most members of the Iraqi government get.'"

During the intermission, there was much discussion of the history of the Paramount and Jeffords's role in its revival.

The theater opened in January 1914, and thrived for many years as a site of live performances and as a movie house. Jeffords' mother played piano there for silent movies.

The Paramount fell into disrepair in the 1970s and closed in 1975. An effort to reopen it began in 1983, but progressed slowly. An outside fund-raising firm said there was not enough local support for the project.

"What the experts didn't realize is that the Rutlanders had a secret ally positioned strategically in Washington," James Herlihy said. "Without Jim Jeffords, this magnificent theater you are in simply would not have opened."

Jeffords got a \$1.3 million appropriation that kick-started the fund-raising process.

Herlihy also spoke of Jeffords's efforts to bring passenger rail traffic back to Rutland.

"You've got eight months left in office and we're wondering what else we can ask you for," he joked. "Jim, we think Rutland should have its own seaport."

Jeffords, for his part, said he was looking forward to spending more time in Vermont and perhaps getting to see some shows in the theater he helped restore.

"I love this place," he said. "I think it's Vermont and Rutland at its finest how the public came together and made this a great institution."